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AUTHOR Copland-Wood, Barbara A.
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at Pennsylvania State University to determine the degree of involvement in college life of commuter students aged 25 or older. A sample was drawn from a list of 1,449 students identified by the university as being 25 or older. From these names, 502 were selected as commuters (living more than five miles from campus) and received a survey form and cover letter. The questionnaire investigated the students' attitudes about the instructional environment, involvement through extracurricular activities, involvement through participation in cultural/entertainment events, and commuter needs. Of the 502 questionnaires, 174 usable surveys were returned. Respondents were about equally divided by sex; 73 percent were between the ages of 25 and 34, while 26 percent were between 35 and 54 years of age. Sixty percent of the sample were full-time students. The contention of Chickering and Astin's earlier studies--that commuter students are less involved, academically and socially, with the college campus--was supported by this study. Older commuter students were less likely to study on campus, were not involved extensively in on- or off-campus organizations, seldom attended campus or off-campus events and were divided about whether they felt a part of the student body. The majority felt detached, even isolated from the mainstream of the campus. However, one part of the study suggested that these students may be involved in a different sense--psychologically rather than physically. The study found that these older students need better parking facilities, more flexible scheduling, more lounges or quiet study areas, and improved communications. The survey instrument is appended. (KC)

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OLDER COMMUTER STUDENTS AND THE COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCE:

INVOLVED OR DETACHED?

Barbara A. Copland-Wood
Coordinator
Returning Adult Student Center
Pennsylvania State University

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

OLDER COMMUTER STUDENTS AND THE COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCE: INVOLVED OR DETACHED?

Response to a recent survey of older commuter students at a large Eastern university provided this exchange: Question - "Do you feel part of the student body at this institution?" Answer: "My classes average one hundred twenty-five students; for the first four weeks I never sat next to the same person twice! No one asked my name and, God help me, if the computer screws me up, because no one ever talks to me. I'm on my own and lonely. P.S. This should tell you how desparate I am to talk to someone; I just poured my problems out to a piece of paper. HELP!"

This quote illustrates that older students who commute to primarily residential college campuses are often ignored with regard to their needs, their development, and their persistence toward degree completion. Commuter students are often invisible because studies of student development typically focus on residential students. If the student is over twenty-five years old, the problem is further compounded by a dearth of systematic research on this specific commuter subgroup (Foster, 1978). On campuses which generally serve the 18-22 year old traditional student, a possible prejudice exists about the authenticity of older students as "real" students.

Much of the recent literature on college student development focuses on the concept of involvement as the leading cause of development or impact of the college experience on the student. Astin (1978, 1985) and Chickering (1974) indicate that the more a student is involved in campus life, socially and academically, the greater the impact of the college experience. Chickering (1974) suggests in this regard that residential students are the "haves" and commtuers the "have nots" in terms of college impact. He also says that persistance is related to this gap; the greater the gap or the less involvement a student has with the institution; the less likely the student

is to persist toward degree completion. The present study was undertaken to examine the involvement hypothesis as it relates to older studnets. Baseline data to assess involvement of older commuter students at a residential campus were collected through a survey which also elicted information about unique needs these students may have.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Astin (1978), in Four Critical Years, states that the construct of involvement, first proposed in his study of dropouts, is the time and effort expended by the student in activities that related directly to the institution and its program (p. 21). He says that "students at the low end of the involvement continum are those who live off campus, who come only for classes, who devote minimum effort to their academic activities, and whose lives are concerned mainly with persons and events outside of the institution." Conversely, highly involved students live on campus, are actively involved in campus activities, and more frequently interact with faculty and other students.

In his annual survey, the Cooperative Institute Research Program (CIRP), of over 200,000 students at 300 institutions, Astin, among other things, measures involvement through questions in eight general areas: (1) residence, (2) involvement with faculty, (3) familiarity with professors in one's major, (4) verbal aggressiveness, (5) academic involvement, (6) involvement in research, (7) involvement in student government, and (8) involvement in athletics. While factor analysis of the CIRP instrument did not reveal a general involvement factor, Astin (1978) hypothesized that college impact and persistence is highly related to these eight variables or what he called involvement.

Kuh and Ardaiolo (1979), in a comparison of traditional students and adult learners with regard to their degree of participation in extracurricular

activities, found that adult learners were least likely to be involved in out of class university sponsored programs. They did find, however, that adult learners at traditional campuses were more like traditional students than those at commuter campuses; they participated more in extracurricular activities than those adults at commuter campuses, but not as much as traditional students. This study suggests some minimal level of involvement may suffice to promote persistence.

Chickering (1974), in referring to resident students as the "haves" and commtuers as the "have nots", found that resident students engage more fully in the academic program and associated intellectual activities. Due to the gap between residents and commuters, the educational consequences for commuters are bleak. Commuters less frequently plan to return to school after their first year and less frequently plan full-time study. If they do remain in school, commuters continue to lose ground to residents during the four years. In all, Chickerking paints a dismal picture of the impact of college on commuters.

METHOD

The Questionnaire. The typical procedure for making comparisons between two different groups, in the present instance commuters and residents, is to administer the same questions to each group. This was not done in the present study for a number of reasons. First, the CIRP questionnaire used by Astin for research on student involvement is designed for traditional aged students; many items are inappropriate for older independent students. Secondly, because of the length of the CIRP, the likelihood of getting a sufficiently large response to make the results useable is low, given the nature of the respondent group. Third, based on a factor analysis of the CIRP, the involvement concept was derived from several items on the instrument

which were not revealed by the researcher. Finally, a questionnaire (Milesky, 1981) developed by Boston University specifically for commuters was judged to contain enough similar items to make a comparison possible.

Sixty-four items on the CIRP are cited by Astin (1978) as being related to the construct of involvement. Fifty-seven of the items are associated with attitudes, beliefs, and self-concept while seven are associated with satisfaction with the undergraduate experience.

Items on the Commuting Student Survey (CSS) adapted from Boston University which were thought to be comparable to the CIRP survey dealth with (1) two items concerning frequency of facility use; (2) one item concerning where students study; (3) two items concerned with being informed about events on campus, and (4) one item about feeling a part of the student body. Eight additional items measured general involvement through attitudes expressed about the institutional environment; twelve items measured involvement through extracurricular activity; and eight items measured involvement through participation in cultural/entertainment events.

Data Analysis. Summary statistics for the total group and by sex were produced by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Nie, et. al, 1975). To test for the concept of involvement, variables concerned with attitudes about the institutional environment, involvement through extra-curricular activity, and involvement through participation in cultural/ entertainment events were aggregated, the total score of each suggested the direction of involvement. Finally, variables concerned with commuter needs were aggregated and analyzed.

Subjects. The sample was drawn from a list of 1,449 students identified by the Office of Planning and Analysis at The Pennsylvania State University as being twenty-five years of age or older. The original sample contained

names of 965 men and 484 women who were enrolled in continuing education or resident instruction classes during Spring semester 1985. The list included degree, nondegree, and provisional students.

Five hundred and two names were selected from the list using the definition of commuter as one who lived outside of a five mile radius of the campus; thus State College and University Park were excluded. Because of the selection process, it was not possible to preserve the sex composition of the original sample. The Commuting Student Survey (CSS) was sent to this group of 502 students together with a cover letter (see Appendix A). Six weeks later a telephone survey of nonrespondents was done which resulted in the return of six additional surveys.

RESULTS

Description of the Respondents. Of the 502 survey questionnaires sent, one hundred seventy four usable surveys were returned representing a thirty-four percent return. Eighty-nine or fifty-one percent of the sample were male and eighty-three or forty-eight percent of the sample were female. One survey was not identified by sex. Sixty-three percent of the sample were married, twenty-four percent single, thirteen percent separated/divorced, and one percent "other". Half of the sample was below seventh semester standing and half above. No sex differences in semester standing seemed apparent. Seventy-three percent of the sample were between the ages of 25-34 years old while twenty-six percent were between 35-54 years. Women were slightly older than the men in the sample. Sixty percent of the sample were full-time students while forty percent were part-time. Almost half of the sample carried between 13-18 credits per semester. Women tended to carry fewer credits.

Involvement Hypothesis. *Two questions in the survey were related to academic involvement but were not part of the aggregated variables. One question, where do you do most of your studying, yielded interesting results. Table 1 shows that sixty-eight percent of the sample studied at home, fourteen percent studied in the library, and five percent in vacant classrooms.*

Table 1
Where Respondents Study

	Library		Classroom		Lounges		Home		Student Union		Other		No Response	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	17	19	7	8	1	1	55	62	6	7	3	3	0	0
Female	7	8	2	2	4	5	63	76	3	4	3	4	1	1

A related question asked how many hours respondents spent in the library per week. Table 2 shows that forty percent spent 1-5 hours per week in the library, while thirty-six percent spent none. Twenty percent spent 6-15 hours per week in the library. Both of these results suggest that if academic involvement is in part defined by where one studies and time spent in the library, adults in this study were not highly involved.

Table 2
Hours Spent in Library

	None		1-5 Hours		6-10 Hours		11-15 Hours		>15 Hours	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	19	21	41	46	17	19	9	10	3	3
Female	43	52	29	35	6	7	3	4	2	2

Questions 22-29 (see appendix A) in the survey addressed general involvement, from social life to reading the campus newspaper. By aggregating the results of these questions, a general involvement score was sought. Table 3 shows the results inconclusive as fifty-five percent of the sample agreed or strongly agreed with the items indicating involvement whereas forty-five percent disagreed or strongly disagreed suggesting lack of involvement. There was widespread agreement on items having to do with access to faculty, staff, and information and disagreement on items dealing with social life and time on campus.

Table 3
General Involvement

Item	Strongly Agree N	%	Agree N	%	Disagree N	%	Strongly Disagree N	%	No Response N	%
22	11	6	43	25	73	42	43	25	2	1
23	3	2	89	51	59	34	21	12	1	1
24	27	16	59	34	72	42	13	7	1	1
25	16	9	39	23	91	53	25	14	1	1
26	44	25	96	55	26	15	6	3	1	1
27	17	10	87	50	46	27	14	8	8	5
28	50	29	52	30	55	32	13	7	2	1
29	44	25	83	48	22	13	22	13	2	1
Involvement	212	15	548	40	444	32	157	11	18	1

Items 30-41 dealing with involvement in campus and off-campus organizations were another index of involvement (see appendix A). Table 4 shows that by aggregating the scores of these variables, sixty-three percent of the respondents were not involved and did not want to be while twenty-one percent were not involved but wished to be. The overall directions of this aggregate variable suggests that older adult commuters were not involved in campus and off-campus organizations and did not wish to be.

Table 4
Involvement in Campus/Off-Campus Organizations

Item	Extremely Involved		Moderately Involved		Occasionally Involved		Not Involved/ Don't wish to be		Not Involved/ Wish to be		No Response	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
30	6	3	10	6	40	23	68	39	45	26	4	2
31	0	0	1	1	2	1	151	87	16	9	3	2
32	1	1	5	3	17	10	110	64	35	20	5	3
33	0	0	0	0	2	1	152	88	15	9	3	2
34	0	0	3	2	10	6	114	66	42	24	4	2
35	0	0	2	1	7	4	147	85	12	7	4	2
36	2	1	7	4	15	9	88	51	55	32	6	4
37	0	0	0	0	6	3	143	83	20	12	4	2
38	4	2	9	5	18	10	57	33	79	46	6	3
39	0	0	0	0	14	8	120	69	33	20	5	3
40	2	1	3	2	11	6	79	46	71	41	7	4
41	21	12	16	9	17	10	76	44	16	9	27	16
Involvement	36	2	56	3	159	8	1305	63	439	21	78	4

Items 42-49 (see appendix A), frequency of attendance at various campus and off-campus events, were another measure of involvement. Table 5 indicates that sixty percent of the respondents did not attend any events during the

Table 5
Involvement in Campus/Off-Campus Events

Item	Didn't Attend		Attended 1-2 times		Attended 3-4 times		Attended 5-6 times		Attended >7 times		No Response	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
42	132	77	33	19	1	½	1	½	1	½	4	2
43	124	72	40	23	4	2	0	0	2	1	2	1
44	106	62	38	22	18	10	5	3	3	2	2	1
45	65	38	61	35	20	7	12	7	12	7	2	1
46	77	45	78	45	12	7	1	1	0	0	4	2
47	148	86	14	8	4	2	1	1	3	2	2	1
48	93	54	47	28	10	6	9	5	13	7	0	0
49	78	46	68	39	14	8	7	4	4	2	1	1
Involvement	823	60	379	27	83	6	36	3	38	3	17	1

semester and twenty-seven percent attended one or twice. A very small percent attended on a regular basis. This aggregate variable suggests that older adult commuters were not involved in attending campus and off-campus events.

A final question on the survey which dealt with involvement asked older commuters whether they felt a part of the student body. Of those who responded, eighty-one said "no" while forty-eight said "yes". Ten persons were undecided. some of the reasons for feeling a part/not a part of the student body were, "I feel a part of it academically, not socially," "I feel a part of it in a small way," and "I'm only putting in my time until I get enough credits to graduate." These best sum up the feelings of detachment commonly felt by the older commuter student.

Needs. Although older commuters in this study appeared unlikely to be involved in the academic and social life of the campus, they were able to identify some areas of need which they, as commuters have and, perhaps, would help them feel part of the campus life. Overwhelmingly, the respondents perceived need for lockers, a commuter newletter, reserved computers, and programs to promote interaction between commuters and faculty/staff.

Two open-ended questions were asked in a effort to learn what additional services were needed by commuters. One asked how the institution could improve student services. By far, parking was the single most mentioned item. Open parking, dispersed parking, and short-term parking were varieties of the theme. Other improvements included flexible scheduling, offices open at night, more quiet study areas, lounges, and places to change clothes.

The second open-ended question asked what respondents felt were some disadvantages of being a commuter. Overwhelmingly they felt that the lack of involvement was the largest disadvantage. They cited such things as

being unable to attend evening seminars, lectures, and special events because of living too far from campus. Some felt isolated, even alienated from other students and unhappy about the lack of involvement with faculty. Being out of touch, not a part of campus life, feeling a lack of cohesion with the campus were some feelings expressed by the respondents. Other disadvantages mentioned were the time involved in commuting, parking, walking to class, demands of classes which did not consider the commuter student, and the lack of information.

DISCUSSION

Are older commuter students involved or detached from the academic and social life of a residential campus? Two caveats are in order before addressing this question. First, generalizations from this study are guarded due to a response rate of less than half. Secondly, because the Commuter Student Survey (CCS) and the CIRP are two different instruments without psychometric studies to support their comparability, correspondence between the items on each ought to remain tentative until further research is done.

Involvement. Chickering and Astin's contention that commuter students are less involved, academically and socially, with the college campus was supported by the results of the present study. Older commtuer students were less likely to study on campus, used the library infrequently, had little social life and time on campus, were not involved extensively in on or off campus organizations, seldom attended campus or off-campus events and were divided about whether they felt a part of the student body. The majority felt detached, even isolated from the main stream of the campus. Yet one part of the study, the open-ended questions particularly, indicates that although older commuter students appear detached, they may be involved in a different sense of the concept involvement.

Over one-third of the respondent mentioned a lack of invovlement as a major disadvantage of commuting. It could be that as Astin (1985) suggests, "there are of course many other possible forms of involvement." As defined and used in Astin's work, involvement is largely physical in nature - living and working on campus, participating in campus organizations and events, etc. This study suggests that another facet of involvement may be psychological, a desire to be more involved but an inability to be so due to time constraints. Psychological involvement may be a more powerful description of adult student development and persistence than physical involvement. Longitudinal studies of the adult commuter population are necessary to test this assumption.

Needs. With declining resources at most institutions of higher education, it is not usually possible to provide for new needs which may be identified by subgroups of an increasingly diverse student body. However, it is reasonable to expect that existing resources be reconstituted to serve a previously underserved population especially when the subpopulation is increasingly suplanting the 18-22 year olds. If involvement is physical as well as psychological, it is necessary to provide for commuter needs that will help them feel less detached from the institution. It is therefore necessary for institutions to be more flexible in their parking and scheduling policies, to designate more areas as lounges or quiet study areas and to improve communications for commuters.

To test the assumption that involvement of adult commuter students is more psychological than physical, it is suggested that additional research of a longitudinal nature be done using the CSS and records of persistence. It is further recommended that factor analytic studies of the CSS be done in an effort to test the assumption that many of its items are comparable to the CIRP. Future comparisons of widely diverse student populations would

be more reliable with such information. Finally, additional studies are necessary to support the notion that physical involvement as described variously by researchers is an appropriate concept in reference to adult learners.

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Appendix A

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
DIVISION OF COUNSELING AND HEALTH SERVICES
UNIVERSITY PARK, PENNSYLVANIA 16802

Returning Adult Student Center
102 Boucke Building

Area Code 814
863-3887

April 1985

Dear Commuter Student:

The Returning Adult Student Center at University Park is conducting a study of commuter student needs. One difficulty in such a study is identifying older students who are commuters. Your name was obtained from a list of undergraduates, twenty-five years of age and older, provided by the Office of Planning and Analysis. We are not certain that you are a commuter; if you live outside of a five mile radius of the University, you are a commuter for the purpose of this study. Please fill out the enclosed survey and return it to us in the envelope provided. If you don't meet our definition of a commuter or are not twenty-five years old or older, please do not complete the survey.

We at the Returning Adult Student Center are very interested in better meeting the needs of older students who commute. With the information you provide we can better access those needs and obtain resources to meet them.

I thank you for taking the time to complete the survey; I know your time is a precious commodity. Please return the survey by May 31, 1985.

Sincerely,

Barbara C. Wood

Barbara C. Wood, D.Ed.
Coordinator

BCW:lmd
encs.

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY UNIVERSITY

The Pennsylvania State University
RETURNING ADULT STUDENT CENTER
COMMUTING STUDENT SURVEY[1]

PART 1 - DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. Sex: ____ male ____ female

2. Semester Standing: _____ 1-2 _____ 5-6 _____ 8+
_____ 3-4 _____ 7-8 _____ graduate

3. Marital Status: ____ single
____ married
____ separated/ divorced

4. Number of dependents: ____ one
____ two
____ three or more

5. Your age: _____

6. Racial/Ethnic background: ____ Caucasian; _____ Black; _____ Hispanic; _____ Asian;
_____ Native American; _____ Other (specify)

7. Are you a: _____ full-time (12 or more credits) student
_____ part-time (9 or less credits) student

8. How many credits do you average per semester: ____ 8 or less; ____ 9-12; ____ 13-18

9. Please describe your housing situation: _____ live in University housing
_____ live in an apartment
_____ live at home with spouse
_____ live at home with parents

10. What is your share of the total monthly rent or mortgage payment including heat and electricity for your apartment, house, or room:

____ not applicable ____ $151-$200 ____ $251-$300 ____ over $350
____ $100-$150 ____ $201-$250 ____ $301-$350

11. How often do you come to campus: _____ one or two days per week
_____ three days per week
_____ four or five days per week
_____ more than five days per week

12. What method of transportation do you usually use to get to campus:

_____ drive alone _____ public transportation _____ walk
_____ carpool, rideshare _____ bicycle _____ other (specify) _____

(over)

[1]Adapted from a questionnaire developed by Boston University, November 1981.

13. If you drive a car, where do you park generally:

_____ University lot
_____ State College streets
_____ private lot
_____ other (specify) _____

14. How long does it take you to travel one way to or from campus:

_____ less than 10 minutes
_____ 10-20 minutes
_____ 20-30 minutes
_____ 30 minutes to 1 hour
_____ more than one hour

15. Approximately how many miles (one way) do you travel to University Park:

_____ under 5 miles
_____ 5-20 miles
_____ 21-36 miles
_____ 37-52 miles
_____ over 52 miles

16. Approximately how much do you spend on transportation and parking expenses each month:

_____ under $25
_____ $26-$50
_____ $51-$75
_____ $76 or more

17. If you are currently employed, how many hours per week do you work:

_____ not applicable
_____ 1-10 hours
_____ 11-20 hours
_____ 21-30 hours
_____ 31-40 hours
_____ over 40 hours

18. While on campus, where do you generally eat:

_____ residence hall dining room
_____ bring own lunch
_____ eat at State College restaurant
_____ go home
_____ HUB cafeteria
_____ Kern
_____ other (specify) _____

19. Which of the following best describes where you do most of your studying:

_____ library on campus
_____ vacant classroom
_____ lounges on campus
_____ home
_____ HUB
_____ other (specify) _____

20. How many hours per week do you generally spend in the University library:

_____ none; _____ 1-5; _____ 6-10; _____ 11-15; _____ more than 15

21. What would be the best time for you to participate in or attend on-campus activities other than classes:

____ 8-10 AM; ____ 10-Noon; ____ 12-2 PM; ____ 2-5 PM; ____ 5-8 PM; ____ later than 8 PM

For questions 22-29, indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement by using the letter of the following responses:

A = Strongly agree B = Agree C = Disagree D = Strongly disagree

_____ 22. I feel that by attending PSU, my social life has improved.

_____ 23. I am generally aware of programs and activities that take place on campus.

_____ 24. I spend as little time as possible on campus.

_____ 25. I would like to spend more time on campus, but feel there is little available for me to participate in.

_____ 26. The faculty and staff at PSU are generally available and willing to talk to me about academic subjects outside of class.

_____ 27. The faculty and staff at PSU are generally available and willing to talk to me about non-academic subjects outside of class.

_____ 28. I have difficulty designing a class schedule that doesn't conflict with my personal responsibilities.

_____ 29. The Daily Collegian is a way I find out what's going on at the University.

PART II - ACTIVITY AND INVOLVEMENT

Questions 30 through 41 refer to your level of participation in extra-curricular activities. Please use the letters of the following responses:

A = Extremely involved
B = Moderately involved
C = Occassionally involved
D = Not involved, do not wish to be
E = Not involved, but wish to be

Describe your level of participation:

_____ 30. Extra-curricular activities in general

_____ 31. Student government

_____ 32. Academic clubs

_____ 33. Student publications

_____ 34. Intramural sports

_____ 35. Campus religious organizations

_____ 36. Campus special interest groups/clubs

_____ 37. Campus political groups

_____ 38. Professional organizations within your college

_____ 39. Social service groups

_____ 40. Returning Adult Student Organization

_____ 41. Off-campus organizations (specify) _____

(over)

Questions 42 through 49 refer to cultural and/or entertainment events you may have attended. Indicate, by letter, the average number of times you participated in an activity during a semester:

A = Did not attend this type of event
B = Once or twice a semester
C = Three or four times a semester
D = Five or six times
E = Seven or more times

_____ **42.** Pop concerts
_____ **43.** Classical concerts or recitals
_____ **44.** On-campus films
_____ **45.** Off-campus films
_____ **46.** Guest lecturers/seminars
_____ **47.** Dances, coffeehouses
_____ **48.** Athletic events
_____ **49.** Art/photography exhibits

For questions 50 through 57 indicate how strongly you feel the following services, facilities, and activities are needed. Mark with the appropriate letter:

A = Not needed
B = Needed by others, but I would not use them
C = Needed and I would use them occassionally
D = Needed and I would use them frequently

_____ **50.** Commuter lounge
_____ **51.** Daytime movies, guest lectures, etc.
_____ **52.** Lockers for commuters
_____ **53.** Commuter newsletter
_____ **54.** Computers reserved for use by commuters
_____ **55.** Programs to promote interaction with faculty and staff
_____ **56.** Lounges in classroom buildings
_____ **57.** Other _____

58. Please list or describe ideas you have about how the University could improve student services for commuter/off-campus students:

59. What do you feel are some of the disadvantages of being a commuter or living off campus:

60. Do you feel a part of the student body at PSU? Please explain: